

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

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Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-19

The story of Naaman the leper is an interesting one and familiar to most scholars. The incident however like all accounts in scripture is recorded that we might learn a lesson to help us in our understanding of God's word and His purpose. I am sure you are familiar with the general story but we need once more to see the lesson behind the incident.

Firstly Naaman suffered from leprosy. In Israel this was a symbol of mortality and any Hebrew who contracted the dreadful disease was put outside the camp and so cut off from the rest of the people and the worship of God. Mortality and death entered the world as the wages of sin so that man grows old decays and dies. In order to impress on Israel the great consequences of sin God gave a typical significance to the dreaded chronic disease leprosy. Leprosy was like mortality only the process of decay was rapid and visible. It was in fact a living death. Corrupting flesh can be seen upon the victim even while still alive. So in Israel it was a dreadful disease to have because of its uncleanness, however the Gentiles did not view it in the same light, in fact Naaman appears to be living with his family and even still carrying on his job. Let us have a look at this man Naaman.

- He was the captain of the Syrian army.
- A proud man, courageous soldier and loyal to his king.
- He obviously was highly respected by the King and all who came into contact with him.

Although the Syrians were noted for their cruelty, particularly towards their enemies and captives, it is obvious from this chapter that this man was capable of warmer feelings as shown in the response of the Hebrew girl who suggested that Elisha could cure her master's disease.

Behadad the King was quick to take up the opportunity of getting his trusted servant healed and prepared a very valuable present to be sent to the King of Israel. Jehoram was king of Israel at this time and he was not a man of faith. On reading the letter he was so upset thinking that Syria were trying to pick a fight and start a war. He knew that it was *impossible* for man to heal leprosy, how sad that the king of Israel had less faith than the little girl who had been carried away captive in Assyria. Here faith shone out with her declaration that she knew that Elisha and the God he served had power to heal Naaman. He had a mind of flesh and could not discern spiritual things.

You will remember from the story that Elisha comes to the rescue by telling the king to send Naaman to him. So far everything had gone to plan for Naaman. He felt that the prophet would come out to him and make a great show in healing him then Naaman could give him the reward and all would be well.

But God was not interested in getting favours from Naaman, his attitude had to be changed, he had to be humbled and God glorified.

The message he received from the prophet to "go and wash in the Jordan seven times" was more than he could bear. Elisha did not even come out to meet him and the suggestion that he wash in public in a filthy river brought him into the angriest mood. What does this commandment remind you of in our lives today?

However, thankfully Naaman listened to a faithful servant and humbled himself and after washing seven times became perfectly well again, the dreaded disease was gone. A different man rose that 7th time from the waters and declared “now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel”. Here a Gentile humbled by his circumstances was made to acknowledge the great power of the God of Israel. This time Elisha was pleased to receive this man whose heart had become humbled.

Lesson for today

The parallel between the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian and baptism to those who seek to follow Christ is remarkable and very clear. Belief and baptism are essential for salvation. The Lord Jesus said, “Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. Also, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, he that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned”.

Baptism is not optional. Some people think they can serve God their own way, they might do many mighty deeds and good works, but if they will not humbly submit to baptism they are without hope. As young people we need to think about Naaman, we can not do as we like.

Naaman had found salvation and he was cleansed physically and mentally but we are now to see how human nature took control of another and cost him his life. Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, was incensed at the refusal of Elisha to accept any of the gifts offered by Naaman. He showed a lack of spiritual perception, he had seen Naaman’s pride and then humiliation but he found it incredible that a Gentile and a high ranking Syrian soldier should be let off so lightly after his master had cured him. He did not give God the glory for the cure and he felt *they* should be paid for it. So as we know from the chapter he ran after the company and by pretending Elisha had sent him to get gain for someone else he took money and clothes from Naaman thinking it was there due dessert. Yet by doing so he detracted from the honour due to God by taking a reward for something he had not done. He failed to see that God’s grace cannot be bought with money (see Isa 55:1-3; Matt 10:8). However God is not mocked and we can never hide our wrong doings from him. Gehazi’s deceit was known by God and as a punishment the leprosy which had left the humble Gentile now came upon him. This outward sign of leprosy showed that Gehazi was sick in his mind, he had the mind of the flesh, a mind which had not been affected by God’s law but was sick with the thinking of the flesh.

However, coming back to Naaman. 2 Kings 5:17 records how Naaman asks for some of the soil of Israel to take back with him, adding that he would no longer offer burnt offering nor sacrifices to other gods, but to Yahweh. If you think this was a strange request you will find the answer in Exodus 20:24. Also as the land was God’s (Deut 11:11-12) and Elisha was God’s representative, Naaman thought it only right to ask before he took it.

However we have one more problem. It appears in verse 18 that Naaman is asking for forgiveness when he goes with his master into the house of Rimmon to worship there. It appears with the translation of the verse that Naaman was still going to do this and go with his master when he went to worship the idols. We find that some Hebraists translate the words differently and say the verse should be rendered in the past tense so in fact Naaman was asking for forgiveness or confessing his sins. This is why Elisha told him to “go in peace for his sins would be forgiven”.

There are many lessons in today’s chapter for us to ponder and try to remember.

Firstly the little girl. We do not know how old she was, try to think how she would have been taken from her home by the enemy and made to work as a slave without her parents or family. Yet she knew God was with her and in spite of her circumstances she showed great trust and confident belief in the God she served and His working through His prophet Elisha.

Yet the King of Israel failed greatly in this, thinking that he had to do something and not realising that power of life and death is in the hands of God.

Naamaa, proud, famous, yet he was humble enough to see the need to crush pride and obey the God of Israel.

Have you thought about that call? God does not ask of us heroic deeds but He asks us to humble ourselves in the waters of baptism and to give Him our thinking power to comprehend His word. Are we humble enough to forget the way we want to go and go God's way?

Gehazi could see no further than his present possessions, reward was all he could think of, he did not see the wonders of a Gentile being brought into the way of salvation and because of this, because he was not prepared to give his life to God freely, he lost his life in this horrible disease of leprosy.

We must never feel we need praise and thanks for what we do in God's service, He has shown us the way – God's glory, not ours, is to be our aim in life.

Extra work

Look up Exodus 20:24. Tell me why Naaman wanted the earth and why God chose earth or unhewn stone for this purpose.

Find quotations that show the need for baptism.